
Nathan Tella / Bayer 04 Leverkusen

This is your year this year, right?

“I wouldn’t say that but it is going well at the moment. I am happy.”

Why is it going so well?

“I feel like now, after having maybe had six months to get used to how the team is, how I want to play and what is expected of me while I’m playing, it took me a bit of time to adjust and adapt and once we got into the new year, 2024, I felt like I was finally able to start showing myself be more comfortable and confident on the pitch and also off the pitch. It is going well so far. I feel more confident in myself as a person compared to when I first arrived but that is because of the team and the manager. They have given me a lot of confidence in myself and I am doing the right thing so I want to continue to do that.”

Does it help to be playing from the start?

“Yes, I mean, obviously for myself, it was difficult mentally because I wasn’t starting a lot of games in the league. I was just coming on and obviously I understood that because the team is winning and there is no point changing it if it is working so I just had to be patient and learn the position as well but also just be patient and wait for my time. Then, I was able to get quite a few minutes against Leipzig in January and I felt like I did well. I was able to score and win. Then, playing against Darmstadt as well, I was able to get my first start and two goals and then, going on to the FC Bayern München game, I felt a lot of confidence going into that game. As a team, we all did so it was good to start that game, as well.”

Is it true that you didn’t tell your family that you were starting against Bayern?

“Yes, I usually tell them everything but obviously, because I have not played a lot from the start here, since I’ve been here, I kind of wanted to let them think that I was on the bench again and maybe I would come on but when I found out I was starting on the Friday, I just told one of my friends that I was starting. Then, he asked whether I would tell my parents and I said no. I want to surprise them. My dad, he watched the game to see if I was on the bench and then he saw that I was in the starting eleven so he called my mum to sit and watch the game as well.”

How did your dad respond?

“The first thing he said was “why didn’t you tell me? Why did you not tell me you were starting?”. He is like another manager for me. He always tells me what I could do better or what I have done well so it is always nice to hear from his perspective but then, he was also saying how proud he is of me that I have come a long way over the past year. I went

from playing second division in England to playing against FC Bayern München and starting in the Bundesliga. He said I could be really proud of myself but don't get too carried away because you haven't done anything yet. He is still being hard on me but motivating me as well so he has been really good for me."

Do you feel the pressure beginning to rise?

"No, I don't really pay attention to all that. I keep attention to myself and to the team. None of us really do. We just focus on playing the next game. Winning the next game or playing the best we can the next game. That is what we look at. Especially for me, I don't get too carried away with having had a good game and wanting to get more attention towards me. I just want to continue to work hard and make a name for myself here and help the team as much as I can. Whether it is from the start or coming off the bench."

You are playing more flexibly this year. Is that the key to success?

"As a team, everyone wants to play. Everyone that is in the squad wants to play. As players and as individuals, we try hard, even harder, in training because if the starting eleven looks like it is going to be the same starting eleven, we want to be the first ones to come on and play well, and if there is an injury or a player drops in form, the standard for the player that comes in doesn't change and we are able to keep the same habits that the team was winning with. That was evident for me, especially against Darmstadt. I saw Jeremie (Frimpong) playing really, really well. He has had a really good season. He didn't start that game. They gave me the opportunity to start, and I said I didn't want there to be a noticeable difference when Jeremie is not playing so I felt like I had to push myself in training so that when I got my opportunity to start that game, I would be able to give 100% percent and luckily, I was able to."

What does that say about the quality of the team?

"Yes, it is a very, very talented squad. I feel like no matter what the game is, no matter what opportunity, whether it is the first or the 90th minute, every player who comes in, we are all confident that they can be a game-changer. A match-winner. Also, to have the confidence to do something and not to look like they are out of place. We are all comfortable to come into the team. That is why I think this is a very good team."

How was it to make your debut for Nigeria?

"It was good. I have always wanted to play international football. I never played international football when I was younger. So, for me, it was my first experience to be part of an international team and it was good! It was a good opportunity to play and see what international football was like. In my head, I wanted to play in the African Cup of Nations and I wasn't called up. I was quite disappointed but then, at the same time, I looked at it as an opportunity to play here. We had four players – obviously Victor Boniface got injured – but if there are four players out, I would have more opportunity and I believe I did. I was able to play more and able to score. Obviously, I was disappointed Nigeria didn't win it but for my teammate Odilon (Kossounou), I am really happy for him as well."

What did Xabi say about your record of 33 games unbeaten?

“We have not spoken about it. It is a long season. We have eleven Bundesliga games, the Europa League and the Cup to play. We’re just looking at approaching the next game. We don’t look at the records. Obviously, it is nice to be a part of history. We will always remember that and the history of this season. We broke the record but at the same time, we don’t want to break the record if it doesn’t mean anything. We want to keep focusing and keep doing as well as we can for the duration of the season.”

Is Xabi Alonso a calm coach?

“Yes, I think he doesn’t get too carried away. He doesn’t think about the future. He doesn’t think too far in the future. He only thinks about the next game and the next training session and how to improve. If we won a game 3-0, he will look at why we didn’t win 4-0. He always wants to be the best and a perfectionist. That is why we strive to be the best, as a team, because he brings it out of us as well.”

How did you get into football?

“My best friend, he is still my friend now. I joined them – it was my first school. He was the first person I became friends with. When you are four, you follow him everywhere. He started to play for a local team – Bedwell Rangers. I said to him I wanted to play. I spoke to him. My dad spoke to his dad and they arranged for me to join the team. That is how it started. I was at Bedwell Rangers from the age of four or five right until the age of eight. I had a bunch of trials at Arsenal. Watford. Luton. Tottenham. Quite a few clubs. Chelsea as well. Ultimately, I wanted to play for Arsenal. I am an Arsenal fan. When I had the opportunity to sign there at the age of eight, I said I wanted to do it straight away. Then, I was at Arsenal from the age of eight until seventeen. I ended up going to Southampton. Then going on loan to Burnley and here I am.”

Do you still have contact with that friend?

“Yes, he was here for the FC Bayern München game. He has been my friend for the majority of my life. He was my first and longest friend. It is good to have someone I can also share the journey with as well.”

Is there a coach that has helped you the most in your career?

“I have had a lot of coaches who have done a lot for me. Who have helped me to get to where I am now but the one coach I specifically remember bringing the best out of me and giving me the most confidence in myself, I was in the under-14s at Arsenal. He helped me so much because I was quite a quiet kid. I just wanted to come in and play football. I didn’t want to make a mistake. I kind of let people walk all over me at that age. He gave me the confidence to say “You are at Arsenal for a reason. You are a really good player. You have to believe in yourself. You are talented. Show it. Have a voice.” Then, that gave me a lot of confidence if managers see that, obviously I should believe it myself. From then, with the

under-14s, I started to progress and become a better player. Obviously, now, here I am and I will always remember him being one of the first coaches to take a liking to me and help me.”

How important is confidence?

“Of course, everyone wants to be told they are doing the right things and have someone believe in you. It was nice to have that from my coach.”

What is the key to this season being so special?

“Just approach the games the way we have approached every game. We want to play the best football we can and get the best results we can. As a team, we don’t look to the future but to the next game. The next game is 1. FC Köln. We look at that and after Köln, we look at who is next. We look at the next game and not too far into the future.”

It will be special against 1. FC Köln, right?

“Yes, a very special game. As a team, we are all looking forward to playing against our rivals. It is going to be a good game. A good opportunity for us. We always want to make our supporters happy. It means a lot for us but also for them. We have given them a lot of good memories this season and we want to continue to do that.”

So you’re still not feeling the pressure?

“No. I don’t really look at it like its pressure. We are all just here to play football. Everyone wants to win and that is what is motivating us. No one wants to be a loser. We all want to be winners so we look at it like that.”